

## A Response To “Rap Rhymes and Social Justice” By Iida Kiyoshi

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### Introduction

“Is it music?” could be the first response when people happen to hear hip hop for the first time. I don’t remember exactly when I heard this first, but I had almost the same kind of reaction to hip hop. Back in 2000 when we planned to hold a symposium about New York as a postmodern Metropolis since the 1980s, I was asked to speak about black music as it reflected the current realities of New York in the 1980s and 1990s. I thought that my topic should definitely be hip hop, of which I knew almost nothing at the time. I tried to read some books about it and listened to many hip hop CDs for the occasion, and I was surprised to find I gradually came to like this kind of music. Still, I wondered how I could explain this type of popular culture. As Prof. Iida has pointed out, many books have been published and many scholars have analyzed this postmodern culture. In this introduction, there is a certain meaning to show some aspects of hip hop before focusing on particular points which respond to Prof. Iida’s presentation.

As long as I have considered this phenomenon, there could be various points which should be discussed, such as music genre, race, gender, language, region, commercialism, fashion, religion, censorship, crime (violence, drug, police brutality, prison), ideology, related art forms, popular culture, historical perspectives and so on. Race is a crucial factor in hip hop, as young urban blacks created the genre. But strictly speaking, it was not only urban black people in the USA, but also Caribbean musicians who took an important part in creating hip hop. Later, other people started to rap, such as Puerto Ricans in NY, and Chicanos in LA. As for gender, many gangsta rap lyrics are criticized for abusing females, or showing explicit machismo. And rap lyrics are expressed through Ebonics, a kind of black discourse or African-American vernacular with so many words, compared to former black music. This rhyming with ghetto slang echoed the long tradition of African speech, variously expressed as the dozens, the toasts, boasting, signifying, schoolyard rhymes, and jailhouse rhymes.

As region was already mentioned when race was explained, I will move on to hip hop as popular culture, which understandably became a target of commercialism. Of course, many rap musicians enjoyed this kind of situation

because some of them got millions of dollars, but at the same time some were exploited by major record companies.

When we think about the ideology contained in hip hop, we remember some rhymes that express black nationalism or Afro-centrism. As art forms related to hip hop, I think of “hood movies,” aka hip hop movies, and hip hop novels. Later, I will discuss hip hop novels in detail, comparing them to rap and hood movies. Also, we can’t forget the Afro-diasporic or Atlantic diasporic elements hip hop carries, as hip hop artists are mainly African American, Hispanic and Caribbean, all of which reflect African cultural and language traditions.

Among these points, I’d like to consider hip hop novels corresponding to black vernacular and social injustice, as well as the post-modernity of hip hop culture.

## **I. The Hip Hop Novel and Social (In)justice**

### **A. The Hood Movie: A Visual Presentation of Hip Hop**

In the early 1990s, films called “hood movies” appeared. These movies, which are closely related to the hip hop movement, represent young urban black boys who live in and try to get out of the “hood” (a diminutive form of neighborhood). We’re then surprised to find the directors were young blacks in their twenties. *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), a story of boys in South Central, LA, was directed by John Singleton, 23 years old. And the director of *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), describing boys who try to escape the hood by committing crimes, was Matty Rich, 19 years old. Of course, it must be admitted that their forerunner was Spike Lee, who came to the scene in the 1980s. In 1989 he directed *Do the Right Thing*, which was located in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and said to somehow predict the LA uprising in 1992. Anyway, this style of movie could be used as the visual presentation of hip hop, as both reveal the terrible realities of inner cities.

As already mentioned, “hood” means a particular neighborhood, which could be the ghetto or inner city such as the Bronx, Brooklyn, Compton, or South Central. Here are the characteristics of these movies. The main characters are boys who decide not to live in their hood anymore, try to escape, but fail. This genre is also said to be a cinematic counterpart of hip hop because it visualizes the harsh realities of the ghetto. If it should be explained more precisely, it portrays the feeling of confinement to the ghetto and the limitation of opportunities to young urban blacks.

### **B. So Called Hip Hop Novels**

Being responsible for my role as a commentator, I’d like to respond to Prof. Iida’s presentation in terms of the language of hip hop. In 1999, a famous female rapper and radical activist, Sister Souljah, wrote *The Coldest Winter Ever*. It became popular, selling 400,000 copies, and started a genre known as the hip hop

novel, later called street literature, ghetto literature or urban fiction. The common factor with hood movies is that the main character is trying to get out of the hood. Still, there are some differences. Hip hop novels feature ghetto girls, so they have to fight not only the white system but also black men—and sometimes black women.

One more big difference is that writing novels is not only self-fulfilling for an author, it is also an economical means of living. It is interesting to find that their way of getting out of the underground to above-ground is so similar to that of hip hop. Writers of hip hop novels have the experience of being rejected by publishing companies, so they publish their books and sell them by themselves at many places, such as barbershops, hair salons, and on street corners. Writers seem to know hip hop history and consciously follow it when they do many things by themselves, hoping their books will succeed. They are criticized by some critics for too much ghetto slang, but without it they can't be called hip hop novels anymore.

### **C. Winter in the Material World**

*The Coldest Winter Ever* was set in Brooklyn, NY, and Winter Santiago appeared as a rebellious teenager, a daughter of a notorious drug dealer, Ricky Santiago. Although she enjoyed a wealthy life through her father's drug empire, her mother was shot and the FBI seized her father's possessions. After he was sent to prison, the family scattered, and she decided to live with her aunt. She was just 16 year old when all this happened. Then she moved to new surroundings, the House of Success, a group home for teenage girls. Winter started to make money by selling clothes which her friend Simone stole. But when Simone was arrested and Winter did not put up the money to bail out Simone, they were not friends anymore. Then another friend, Rashida, tried to take Winter to her friend's house. Rashida's friend turned out to be Sister Souljah, against whom Winter declared her hatred in the opening of the novel. This is a situation postmodern novels use, that is, the author appears as one of characters, not a narrator.

While Winter did volunteer work in the house of Sister Souljah, she did not stop making money illegally, somehow caught up in a materialistic world. Winter tried to steal the money of the house and run away, but she was left with no money because Souljah's sister prevented the theft. After living with a man with money and finding she was pregnant, her world again fell around her. Her old friend—and current enemy—Simone appeared and cut Winter's face with a broken bottle. Winter was then arrested and sentenced to prison for transporting drugs in her car. After seven years, she was allowed to attend her mother's funeral. Now with a deep scar on her face, which seems to be a kind of a visual punishment for her follies, Winter met her father and sisters.

I was surprised and then satisfied with the ending where Winter meets her younger sister Porsche, who grew beautiful while living with a rich man. Winter,

however, decided not to warn Porsche about the dangerous world waiting for her. We can't find any happy ending or sentimental closing. The most important thing is to stay cool even when describing the hard realities of the ghetto, just like "The Message" one of the greatest hip hop classics, by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five. I feel some contentment to have read the story of a ghetto girl legally and correctly punished, partly because she was not properly raised. We can feel comfortable that social justice has been done to those who committed crimes, but at the same time we notice they are initially a kind of victim of social injustice. How should we resolve this paradox?

Some stories make us think about the world in which we live. *The Coldest Winter Ever* is that kind of novel. The difference between this work and other hip hop novels is that the former has a perspective which gazes upon the realities of inner cities and the necessary narrative to keep the author's voice cool, but also getting readers involved. I'm sorry to say, however, some hip hop novels are just superficial stories of ghetto ladies' success with street lingo added, or tales pretending to protest drugs and violence among young African-Americans in the inner city.

And one more thing to say about *The Coldest Winter Ever* is that this novel has an aspect of postmodern novels or meta-fiction. As I mentioned before, a group home where Winter takes refugee for some time is operated by a woman named Sister Souljah, a half-fictional and half-real character. And a figure against whom Winter expressed her hatred in the opening is Sister Souljah. The author uses her own persona for a character whose name is the same, and the real Sister Souljah is deeply involved with a group home for ghetto children, but the Sister Souljah in the novel is not a rapper. In this way, the author's appearance destroys the story's fictionality. *The Coldest Winter Ever* could be analyzed as postmodern, but what is postmodern, and how is this connected with hip hop ?

## II. Postmodern Hip hop

### A. Postmodern Ambiguity

As Prof. Iida mentioned "break beats" and "rhythmic noise", and "the self-sufficient autobiography", they are elements of post-modernity. Then again, what is post-modernity? It is difficult to explain this paradigm. Compared to Existentialism or Structuralism, whose paradigms were limited to philosophy and literature, post-modernity is said to cover almost all cultural aspects, such as architecture, philosophy, history, art, literature, cinema, performance, dance, and music. Post-modernity is a radical shift of paradigm, which reflects an emergence of phenomena and era not captured by modernity. But it is impossible to find a coherent system or idea.

Rather, what we can find there, as Ihab Hassan has written, is anti-form, antithesis, dispersal, rhizome/surface, and schizophrenia (Hassan, 91). In other words, central factors about post-modernity are against modernity, dissolving,

scrambling, deconstructing. Post-modernity has no meaning, nor origin, nor history. As originality was an aesthetic ethos of modernity, post-modernity needs no originality, which somehow affects the meaning of inter-textuality, not a single text. And it could be interesting to notice many postmodern elements in hip hop.

### **B. Hip Hop, the Postmodern**

How can we start to talk about factors of hip hop corresponding to those of post-modernity when there are so many? I think we could say the main aesthetics of hip hop is borrowing or quotation, which is definitely, absolutely postmodern. Quotation is a technique to erase the origin, deny originality, and use inter-textuality. Hip hop cuts and mixes (“cut ‘n’ mix”), distorts, transforms, and reuses past record resources. That leads to a reconstruction of musical memory of the past. And in its early period, hip hop used existing tunes anonymously to confuse the copyright system or intellectual property law. Later, however, when hip hop became popular, copyright owners, record companies and musicians banned this kind of illegal use of tunes. One more postmodern mode, which was not pointed out before, is self-reflexivity. This we can find in *The Coldest Winter Ever* as the appearance of the author as one of the characters. In hip hop, this self-reflexive mode is a way to tell when and where hip hop was born, or who was the first or greatest rapper.

### **C. Repeat the Beat**

I’d like to show some examples of quotation to make its meaning clear. It is said that “Rapper’s Delight” of 1979 was the first hip hop song, but it is called the first hip hop because of its title and its number of words. We could think of it as a kind of disco music of the direct past. So the real advent of hip hop should be “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five in 1983. And for this genuine hip hop, they quoted “Wordy Rappinghood” by Tom Tom Club, the alter ego of Talking Heads. It is interesting to find that a later hip hop group named Jungle Brothers used this classic hip hop “The Message” in their “Straight out of Jungle,” which is a good example of the inter-textuality of hip hop. The Jungle Brothers also took the R&B classic “What’s Going On?” by Marvin Gay. His “Inner City Blues” was employed by the group named A Tribe Called Quest in their *People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*. This kind of a repeat with slight variation reminds me of funk music. Funk music was once swept away by disco music, but revived through hip hop. This repetition with a slight variation can be found in almost any black music, such as gospel, blues, jazz, soul, funk, and hip hop. The repetition makes a beat, and the beat creates a groove among musicians, and between musicians and the audience.

### **D. Hip Hop Rules**

The next topic should be “the self-sufficient autobiography,” which Prof. Iida mentioned. This is a clear characteristic of hip hop which could be at the same

time in the form of a boast. In other words, this self-reflexive way about a current situation of hip hop or rappers' ability of rhyming is something other music genres don't have. This is also a postmodern aspect, so let's take an example from the group BDP, or Boogie Down Production, that shows hip hop history in "Hip Hop Rules." Here in this rhyme, KRS-One, a member of BDP, traces hip hop history, and then boasts that his rap is the greatest.

I will quote just a short passage: "Here comes Grandmaster Flash nonstop/And right after Flash, Run-D.M.C. dropped." This could be a remnant of the rhyme war in the street in the early years of hip hop. And the self-reflexive mode of post-modernity is conscious of the relationship between self and outer world and its standing point. This is also connected to hip hop's self-sufficient autobiography.

Here is another example of self-sufficient autobiography and misreading. In "Why Was It?" KRS-One, a second-generation Jamaican immigrant, seemed to follow Marcus Garvey's "Return to Africa," declaring that Moses was black. This kind of re-reading of the Bible is not logical, but its meaning is to educate young black people about black pride.

### Conclusion

In terms of hip hop and social justice, the hip hop novel is an extended version of hip hop. Its stories, characters, and background are closely and deeply affected by hip hop, which expresses ghetto realities in the black vernacular. African-Americans have been discriminated against through social injustice for centuries, and thus necessarily present social justice in their music.

Take, for example, "Change Is Gonna Come" (1964). This famous soul music by Sam Cooke has an emergent message for change in the earlier period of the Civil Rights Movement. It was, however, quoted later by Notorious Big in his "Things Done Changed" (1994) in a rather negative tone. That means that hope for change has not been realized, but in fact things have gotten worse. So was the message by Notorious Big, who was shot to death in the Rap War, just like the shooting death of Sam Cooke. This apocalyptic image is also postmodern.

Viewing the positive side of hip hop, it symbolizes an inner beat of American blacks. In hip hop history, it is often said that the Last Poets, a group of poets and activists, were the first to rap before hip hop. I feel, however, that some social activists had more beats in their voices than the Last Poets. Without any musical instruments or music in the background, Malcolm X spoke to the audience with a kind of beat within. This inner beat has a drive to persuade the people, and creates groove between the people and the speaker. Even listening to "Stay Fly" from *Most Know Unknown* (2005), by Three 6 Mafia, I feel this, though it has break beats background. In every kind of black music—even church sermons and activists' speeches—we can feel the inner beat, which is a physical and festive aspect of black music. And this inner beat of black culture could be a powerful

weapon against social injustice and a useful device for justice.

### **Works Cited**

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